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Editorial

A funny thing happened when, on November 12, 1982, I arrived at Delhi Airport on my way to Hyderabad. I was only carrying a small attaché case, and was thinking that I had nothing that would have to be shown. "Should I open this?" I asked the officer, placing my attaché case on the bench. "Why not?", came the very terse reply from the Sikh gentleman standing on the other side.

I opened my attaché case, and he searched it inside out. All he found was some clothing and four copies of my Urdu commentary of the Quran, Tazkeer-ul-Quran. He picked up one copy. "Is this the Quran?" he asked, opening it. I said that it was. He understood Urdu, and began reading the translation. "I would like to read a translation of the Quran," he said after a while, "but I do not have one of my own." I told him that I was now on my way to Hyderabad and – God willing – would provide him with a translation of the Quran on my return. I gave him a copy of *Hayat-e-Tayyeba (The Good Life)*, a pamphlet in which selected verses of the Quran have been arranged under separate headings.

I took his address and continued on my way. Why was it, I thought, that a person who had, a few minutes previously, addressed me in a curt and off-hand manner, had suddenly become so affable and warmhearted in his manner? There was only one reason: previously I had been to him a "carrier of a bag"; afterwards I became a "carrier of the Quran". All sorts of people take bags into airports: some are hijackers with firearms; some are smugglers with contraband goods; some are terrorists who travel from one country to another, intent on bringing down governments. When I appeared to the security officer as a carrier of a bag, I appeared in the form of a hijacker, smuggler or terrorist. But when I appeared to him in the form of a carrier of the Quran, he put me in a different category: now I was a person who was, holding the true book of God in my hand.

Symbolically, this incident shows the state of the Muslims today. Up to now, they have presented themselves as "carriers of bags" to the world: that is why others treat them with disdain. If they were to come before people as carriers of the Quran, they would become a topic of interest and affection to their fellows; as long, that is, as they have not given people a false impression of the Quran by capricious interpretations of it.

Evergreen Faith

The need for a "new religion" felt by philosophers is in fact a need for true religion. But few are able to differentiate between the true faith taught by the Prophet of Islam, and the distorted version practiced by those who claim to be his followers.

"There is, I should say, a need and there is even a demand for a new religion. We want a creed to reorganize and justify in due proportion all human interests and at the same time to supply the intellect with that to which it can hold with confidence. Whether we shall get this religion, and if so, how, whether by modification of what exists or in some other way, I am unable to surmise, but it is not so far as I can see in the power of philosophy to supply this demand. And I must doubt the possibility of religious doctrine being able in the end to meet our metaphysical requirement of ultimate consistency."

"All that in my opinion we can reasonably desire is on one side a general faith and on the other side such a critical philosophy as would be able in some sense to justify and support this faith. To think that any positive metaphysical doctrine must remain esoteric is but a refuge amidst general destitution. Therefore, a religious belief founded otherwise than a metaphysics and a metaphysics able in some sense to justify that creed seem to me what is required to fulfill our wishes. And though this fulfillment is a thing which I cannot myself expect to see, and though the obstacles in its way are certainly great, on the other hand I cannot regard it as impossible."

(F.H. Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality*, P. 446-447) During the course of time, God has sent countless Prophets to the world. The religion that was revealed to them, and which they communicated to mankind, was the true and authentic religion of God; it was the answer to the call of man's inner nature; it showed man the way to spiritual fulfillment in this world, and salvation in the next.

As time went by, however, man corrupted true, divinely revealed religion to make it accord with his own desires. The religion that he followed became man-made rather than God-inspired. He manipulated the teachings of true religion so that they would fit in with his short-term material interests, rather than his long-term spiritual needs.

This has been the case with every religion, and man has invariably found himself in a spiritual vacuum. The urge to find truth remained embedded in his soul, but the course to spiritual fulfillment which had been forged by the Prophets had become obscured; man still asked questions, but there was no one to provide the answers.

God then had mercy on mankind. He sent a final Prophet to the world, one whose religion would always remain immune to any attempt at changing it; one whose scriptures would remain intact for all time, so that anyone who desired true spiritual solace would be able to have recourse to his teaching, and emulate his practices.

This final Prophet was Mohammad, may peace be upon him. The book that was revealed to him was the Quran. A record of his life and teachings is preserved in the Hadith, or traditions of the Prophet, as well as books on Seerat – biographies dealing with the inner force that inspired the Prophet as well as the outward actions that he performed.

The preservation of true religion, however, was confined to the basic teachings; it did not extend to the manner in which these teachings were practiced by those who claimed to be followers of the final Prophet. The scriptures of Islam remained in exactly the same form as they had been in the Prophet's day. Muslims, however, while paying lip service to those scriptures, followed the path of other peoples before them; they adopted a corrupted version of religion; unable to interfere with the scriptures themselves, they developed a style of life which was, in practice, far removed from the scriptures to which they swore allegiance.

The problem which had prevailed before the coming of Islam now reared its head in a new form. Whereas, prior to this, people who sought the truth had been frustrated by the absence of any clear-cut model in the human world, they now became frustrated by an inability to differentiate between the theory and teachings of true Islam on the one hand, as opposed to the religion practised by Muslims on the other. The former would have provided them with the spiritual and intellectual fulfillment that they sought; the latter appeared as any other religion – corrupted and distorted beyond all recognition.

So once again philosophers sought a "new religion." If they had looked at Islam in its original form, as it had been revealed by God and taught by the Prophet, they would have found a religion ever-young, an eternally new religion, ideally suited to cater for man's spiritual needs in every age; but instead they looked at Islam as it was practised by Muslims, and there they found an old, decrepit religion, adapted to cater for the material needs of a few men, but not the spiritual needs of the whole human race.

The need for a "new religion", then, which has been expressed by many philosophers, is, in fact, a need for true religion as it was revealed by God. It is, in fact, a need for true Islam, for Islam is the only religion preserved in its original form. If philosophers were able to separate true Islam from the version of Islam practised by Muslims, they would look no further for an answer to their soul's quest; they would find that what they had been searching for far and wide is here, before their very eyes.

Prejudice could not prevent them from knowing the truth when they saw it

A few years before the emigration of Muslims from Mecca to Medina, when the message of Islam was just reaching Medina, the Prophet sent Mus'ab ibn Umair to that city in 621. He quietly communicated to its people the message of Islam and recited the Quran to them. Sa'ad ibn Mu'az who was chief of the Medinan tribe of Banu Abdul Ashhal, was considerably disconcerted when he heard about Mus'ab's activities. One day he took a spear and went out in search of him. He found him near a well outside the city, talking to a gathering about Islam. Sa'ad ibn Mu'az approached and spoke to them angrily, saying: "Who has brought this stranger here to send us poor people astray. Do you want to bring something we deplore into our homes? I don't want to see you people gathered here again." Asad ibn Zurara who belonged to his tribe, had accepted Islam and spoke up. "Cousin," he said, "hear what he has to say. If it's unreasonable, reject it, and if it's reasonable, accept it." Sa'ad ibn Mu'az mellowed somewhat at these words, and asked what it was that Mus'ab was talking about. In reply Mus'ab recited to him the first few verses of Surah Zukhruf. On hearing the Quran, Sa'ad's anger was quelled, and he began thinking along entirely different lines. In a few days he himself accepted Islam, and started preaching to the Banu Abdul Ashhal tribe. This is how he addressed his tribes' people: "If anyone, old or young, man or woman, has any doubt in this matter, he or she should produce something we can consider better guidance, and we will accept it. But, by God, something has come our way before which we can only bow our heads.

Quranic Connection

Imam Shafii (150-204AH) is remembered as the founder of the principles of Islamic jurisprudence. Besides being a great scholar, he also excelled in piety. Imam Ahmad Ibn Hambal had this to say about him. "I do not know anyone who had such a strong affiliation with Islam as Imam Shafii."

Imam Shafii had learnt the whole of the Quran off by heart by the time he was ten years old. He used to recite the Book of God from cover to cover every three days. His attachment to the Quran was such that he used to seek out the root of every matter in the Quran, not resting content until a point had been proved from the Book of God itself.

All jurists are agreed that consensus of the Muslim community is a valid theological proof. Imam Shafii was keen to establish its validity from the Book of God. He read the Quran over and over again, searching for a verse which would illustrate this point.

Imam Shafii read the Quran 301 times before he finally found a verse which established conclusively the validity of consensus as a theological proof. He was reading through the Quran one day when he reached the one-hundredth-and-fifteenth verse of the fourth chapter (An-Nisa'a). He realized that the verse he was reading provided proof of the fact that Muslim consensus was a valid basis for theological verdicts. The verse was:

"He that disobeys the Apostle after guidance has been made clear to him and follows a path other than that of the faithful, shall be given what he has chosen. We shall cast him into hell: a dismal end."

Reading this verse, Imam Shafii realized that by the "path of the faithful" was meant what was commonly known as consensus.

Early Muslims used to try to ascertain every matter from the Quran, even if it meant reading the Book of God over time and time again. They would not rest content until they found out what the Quran said on a certain matter. How far removed their approach was from that of latter-day Muslims. Certainly, the latter view the Quran as a "holy book", a source of blessing and grace. As for making its teachings a practical part of one's everyday life, and referring to it for guidance in one's spiritual and worldly affairs – in this respect they are sadly lacking.

Seeing Good in Evil

Persia (Iran) came under Muslim rule during the caliphate of Umar Farooq, the second caliph. Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas was commanding the Muslim army during the campaign. The Iranians, having suffered great losses in the war against Muslims, proposed that a peace settlement be negotiated. Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas agreed to this and various envoys were sent by him to the Iranian court of Rustam and Yazdgurd, for the purpose. Many of their names have gone down in history. The last of these delegations was headed by Mughira ibn Shu'ba who made a frank and bold speech before the emperor in his splendid court in the White Palace at Madain. His boldness enraged Yazdgurd: "How dare you talk in this manner in front of me? Had there been no rule against murdering envoys, I would surely have had you killed! Now you had better leave the palace at once and inform your leader to await a huge army led by Rustam, its commander-in-chief, who will bury you all in the trenches of Qadsiyah!"

This was not the end of the matter. The emperor asked one of his courtiers to bring a basket full of earth. When it was brought, he addressed the Muslims again. "Who among you is the noblest born?" They remained silent for a while, then Asim ibn Amr replied that he was." Yazdgurd then ordered the container to be hung around his neck and that they then be driven out of the capital.

The imperial order was carried out. Bearing the container of earth Asim ibn Amr rode fast on his camel for Qadsiyah where the leader was staying. On arrival, he recounted the whole story and placed the container before him. History has recorded the words uttered on this occasion:

"Be happy, by God, Allah has granted you the keys of power over their land." They saw something symbolic in this handing over of the earth and interpreted it to mean that they would eventually gain possession of the land. An incident which had been designed to humiliate them had actually given them food for new hope and courage.

Had these Muslims got enraged, they would have gained nothing but hatred and contempt.

He who repents of sin is even as he who has no sin.

—Prophet Muhammad

The Way of the Prophet

According to ancient Arab custom, a person could only live with the protection of his tribe. At the beginning of his mission in Mecca, the Prophet of Islam lived under the protection of his uncle, Abu Talib, who was chief of the Banu Hashim tribe. In the tenth year of the Prophet's mission, Abu Talib died, and his position was taken by Abu Lahab. Abu Lahab refused to grant the Prophet protection. For the Islamic mission to stay alive the Prophet had to seek the protection of another tribe. It was for this purpose that he traveled to Taif.

Taif is an oasis situated 65 miles south-east of Mecca where the Prophet had some relatives. At that time there were three chiefs in Taif: Abd Yalil, Masood and Hubaib. The Prophet met all three of them, but each of them refused to grant the Prophet protection. One of them said that if God had appointed him as His messenger, he would tear the veil of the Holy Kabah. "Could not God have found someone else to send as His Prophet?", was the reaction of another. "I will not talk to you at all," the third one said. "If you are a Prophet then it would be disrespectful for me to do so, and if you are lying then it would be below me."

Sorrowful, the Prophet set off, back to Mecca. But the people of Taif still did not leave him alone. They set the village urchins on him. He was pursued by stones and abuse. The Prophet's servant, Zaid ibn Harithah, who had accompanied the Prophet on this journey, tried to shield his master with his blanket, but he could not do so. The Prophet's body was stained in blood.

Imagine what a desolate evening that must have been. The Prophet himself later admitted to his wife Aisha that it was the most terrible evening of his life. But the Prophet, in all his pain and sorrow, did not say anything against those who were persecuting him. Rather he prayed for their guidance. "Lord," he said, "guide them for they do not know what they are doing."

This is the attitude that the preacher of the word of God should have towards his people. He should be so eager for their guidance that any pain, any affliction would seem insignificant to him in comparison with his anguish on their behalf. This was the way of the Prophet; if Muslims today do not adopt the same attitude, then on what grounds do they claim to be his followers?

What has to be known before one can Understand

Matches and lighters have only recently come into vogue in rural India. Just fifty years ago people used to light their own stoves with embers left over from the stoves of others. On one occasion a woman went to her neighbours and asked if they had any fire. "On the mantle piece," her neighbour replied. The woman's neighbour was getting on in years and had become hard of hearing, so she could be excused for replying to a question that had not been put to her. Yet there are many whose faculties are in perfect order who do much the same thing.

Back in 1971 General J.N. Chawdhury of the Indian Army delivered a lecture on national security. Stressing the importance of the role intelligence had to play; he said that in wartime it was essential to know what the enemy were going to do before they actually did it. Military commanders should be able to base their decisions on a sound knowledge of enemy strategy. To illustrate this he referred to an incident which occurred during the Indian annexation of Goa in 1961. When Indian Southern Command was asked on the wireless if the Portuguese possessed "armoured cars and tanks", the reply came through: "Everything is OK with the tanks. But they only have a capacity of 15,000 gallons of water." The question was about war tanks, but the answer that came back was concerning water tanks.

Any task requiring the coordinated efforts of several individuals can only be effectively carried out if each person involved plays his part properly. If everybody does the job expected of them the work will proceed towards a satisfactory conclusion. Failure on the part of one participant spells failure for the entire project, for one person cannot be expected to do another's job for him.

Another thing that has to be remembered is that everything cannot be spelt out in words. There are some things that the people involved in a project have to know themselves. Each individual should be alive to his own responsibilities; he should be fully aware of the part that he is going to have to play; he should know exactly what the group of which he is a member is going to expect of him at specific times. If he is asked about "tanks" for instance, he should know without being told that he is being asked about war tanks, not water tanks.

The Essence of all Worship

Abdullah Ibn Abbas, the Prophet's cousin and companion, once said that to everything that God has prescribed there is a definite limit, which can be waived when one is indisposed. Dhikr, or remembrance of God, on the other hand, has no limit; nor can it be excused on account of any disposition. Here are two sayings of the Prophet concerning Dhikr:

“‘Shall I tell you what the best action is, that most pleasing to your Lord, which will raise you up most in His sight, and is better for you than gold and silver, better also than that you should come across your enemies tomorrow and strike one another's necks?’ the Prophet asked. ‘Please do, Prophet of God,’ the companions replied. ‘Remembrance of the Almighty and Exalted God,’ the Prophet said.”

“A man came to the Prophet and asked which of those who struggle for the divine cause would have the greatest reward. ‘The one who remembers God most,’ the Prophet replied. He then asked which of those who fast would have the greatest reward. The Prophet answered again. ‘The one who remembers God most.’ The man then asked about those who pray, pay the poor-due, perform pilgrimage and give charity. The Prophet gave the same reply to all his questions. ‘Those who remember God have gone off with all the rewards,’ Abu Bakr commented to Umar. ‘Indeed,’ the Prophet said.”

(Masnad Ahmad)

Remembrance of God is the greatest of all forms of worship for the simple reason that it is the essence of all worship. However much one devotes oneself to God, however many acts of worship one performs, in the final analysis what is required of one is that one should have been mindful of God in whatever one did.

Essentially, dhikr is another word for realization of God. Dhikr is the state which overcomes a person when he discovers God, when he breaks through the veil of outward forms and penetrates into the world of inner meanings. It is only natural that when this happens he should be mindful of God all the time. Far from being mere repetition of certain words, then, dhikr is a sublime, spiritual experience. It is connected with reality, not with words. When a person discovers God in all His glory and greatness, the effect that it has on him is shattering. His heart and mind are shaken with deep realization of the momentous nature of his discovery. He gives tongue to a litany of praise and adoration.

Dhikr is the state that God's humble servant experiences when he considers God's favours, and reflects upon God's perfection. No believing soul can remain unmoved by such an experience. The awareness of God that fills his heart springs spontaneously to his lips and manifests itself in the form of divinely-inspired words. Death, and the resurrection of man, are realities that loom large in his inner consciousness. His thoughts are on how life started, and how it will end – what came before the world which fills our outward vision, and what will come afterwards. His thoughts take the form of words which incorporate both fear of eternal torment, and longing for eternal bliss.

We cannot think of a sun which refuses to shine, or a computer which has no operator. But when we look at the world we behold great spectacles which all appear to be of their own fashioning. There is art but no artist, masterpieces but no fashioner, coordination but no coordinator, movement but no mover, life but no life-giver; in short, there is evidence of God, but no God. Dhikr is to cross this chasm, to see beyond the world of visible forms to the invisible force that lies beyond; to see the face of the Creator hidden in the veil of His creation. This is the greatest discovery that man can make. The feelings which he experiences at such a time, and the words with which he expresses his feelings, are what go to make up dhikr.

The night of July 16, 1969, was one of tremendous action in newspaper offices the world over. The first man on the moon, Neil Armstrong, had made his landing. News was constantly coming in over the teleprinter, and reporters were rushing to include it all in their morning issues. The news editor of one daily newspaper was sitting back in his chair. A pile of papers lay stacked before him on the desk. When asked about the latest news, he said:

“A lot of very thrilling news is coming in.”

When people hear of man traveling from the earth to the moon, they feel a “thrill”. How is then, that they do not feel thrilled to see the earth and the moon, and the staggering coordination that lies between them? How is it that human phenomena seem thrilling, but no one gives divine phenomena a second thought?

Dhikr is to change the target of one’s vision, to become excited at the work of God, as people normally become excited at the work of man. It is to see manifestations of God’s glory in the world and marvel, as the news editor did on that July night, at how “thrilling” they are.

The End of Life's Journey

One fateful day in April, 1981, when a Delhi-bound train from Allahabad stopped at Ghaziabad, it was discovered to consternation of the passengers that one of their number had suffered a massive heart attack and had died right there in the train before medical aid could reach him. No ordinary passenger, it transpired that he was Mustafa Rasheed Sherwani, the noted industrialist and Member of Parliament, also formerly a famous freedom fighter. He was only 59 and in his prime. But this had not mattered. The time had come for God to take him away, and take him away He did.

Such events are commonplace. Everyday large masses of humanity enter the gates of death. Everyday, tens of thousands of ordinary human beings set off for their worldly destinations, but are seized by God's angels on the way. It makes no difference whether they are in their prime, at the peak of their careers or are doing human service to humanity; their earthly journey is cut short, and they are ushered into their final abode.

We all dream of scaling unprecedented heights of honour and glory and build ourselves palatial houses as worldly symbols of our status in which we intend to enjoy a life of ease, comfort and pleasure. These are the material ends to which all of us strive. But sooner or later comes the realization that what really awaits us is the grave. It is a cold and desolate prospect, and very far removed from our dreams of the immediate future. But we should not think of the grave as being the end of everything. It is certainly the end of our material existence, the reduction of our successes to so much dust, but it marks the stepping-off point for us into eternity. For those who have laboured only towards material ends, this is the most terrible prospect. For it can mean eternal damnation. But for those who have prepared themselves throughout their lives to meet their Maker, the prospect is one of eternal joy.

Every day God is carrying some "passengers bound for Delhi" to the grave. But who pays any heed? People are still convinced that they "are going to Delhi" and that while the grave may be the ultimate destination for others, they themselves are somehow privileged and it is not so for them.

When will the realization come to them that the grave is the ultimate destination of *all*?

Two Instead of One

William II (1859-1941) became King of Prussia and Emperor of Germany on the death of his grandfather William I in 1888. Intelligent but impetuous, he believed in military power. The military might that Germany developed during the reign of William II did not succeed in saving his empire from eclipse. In 1914 his support for Austria helped to precipitate European war, and Germany's resulting defeat brought his abdication. He retired to Doorn in Holland, where he lived quietly until his death in 1941. His abdication and death in exile provide living proof of the fact that it is not military might that keeps kings in power. Rather, it is ability to correctly interpret national and international circumstances, and deal with them effectively.

Shortly before the outbreak of World War I, William II went on an official visit to Switzerland, where he was profoundly impressed by the discipline displayed by the Swiss army. While inspecting a military parade, he jokingly said to one of the soldiers: "Germany's army is twice the size of yours. If the Germans were to attack your country, what would you do?" "Sir, we would have to fire twice instead of once," came the Swiss soldier's grave reply.

If the Swiss soldier was able to reply with such confidence and equanimity, it was because of a certain resoluteness of character backed up by military expertise. Whether faced by numerical superiority or by other daunting factors, it is clear that a combination of expertise and determination can win the day. Some are fortunate enough to be innately resolute, but those who are lacking in this quality can achieve much by prayer. Prayer firms one up in one's resolutions and sees them through to the achievement of ultimate goals. Expertise, on the other hand, is something which must be acquired by struggle, effort and the constant application of intelligence. No problems should be regarded as insuperable, no situation so adverse that it cannot be turned to good account. It is endeavour which matters, and it should be constantly borne in mind that no amount of protest, whether social or political, can make up for a lack of endeavour.

The secret of all success is patience.

The cause of all failure is impatience.

Consistent Character

Human civilization is really just an extension of nature: man takes simple matter and converts it into buildings, machines, factories, industrial plants and all the other artifacts of the modern world. What enables him to do this is the fact that all things have been invested by nature with certain constant properties. Once man has discovered these natural properties, he is able to use them to his own advantage. These properties make up the character of a thing; they are absolutely predictable: everything in nature can be relied upon to act in a certain way. All the advances of human civilization are the result of this predictability. Any change in the properties of basic matter, or unpredictability in its character, would reduce the whole of human civilization to ruins.

If one wants to build a bridge across a river, one uses steel because one knows one can rely on the strength of that metal to hold up the bridge; if steel turned out to be as soft as wax the whole edifice would crash into the water. For construction of buildings one uses bricks and cement, which one is sure will solidify into a firm structure; if stones and cement were like a pile of sand, the buildings would collapse. One knows that when a magnetic field and motion come together the resultant movement of electrons will produce electricity; if this did not happen, the world would suddenly be submerged in darkness.

Such occurrences would mean that things had lost their specific character and the building of civilization would then become impossible. Human civilization can only be fashioned when the things that are essential to it do what is expected of them – while they maintain their basic character. What good would an ice-factory be, for instance, if the water that was put into it turned into steam instead of ice? How could cars and other machines be produced if iron cast into furnaces refused to melt?

Just as the things which contribute to human civilization have to display certain properties for civilization to flourish, so the individuals who constitute human society have to do what is expected of them if society is to run smoothly. They too have to maintain a certain character. The worth of all material objects is dependent upon their reliability in performing the functions that are expected of them. In the same way man's worth depends on his ability to maintain a consistent character under all sorts of conditions. There are certain attributes that constitute a human character; only if one displays these attributes can one be counted as a true human-being.

If a person does not display the facets of human character that are expected of him, all one can say is that he has lost his human worth. A society made up of such people is doomed to unrest and discontent. Society is only as good as the individuals who constitute it. The inevitable result of inconsistent and irregular character on the part of individuals, then, is instability in the society to which they belong.

Corruption of human society comes into being when its members break their promises instead of keeping them; when they are petty instead of open-minded; when they are miserly instead of generous; when they think only of themselves instead of society as a whole; when they are vindictive instead of forgiving, rebellious instead of accommodating; when they vainly pursue their own interests instead of acknowledging the rights of others; when they seek to do other people down instead of lending them a helping hand; when, in short, people fail to treat others as they would have others treat them.

A society will only prove to be strong if its members prove to be human-beings in the real sense of the word, if they display the character that is expected of them as human beings. Where resolve is required they should remain as solid as steel, where pliability is required, as soft as running water. They should remain as still as stones when silence is expected of them, as firm as mountains when constancy is the order of the day. When strong initiatives are required, their enthusiasm should cascade like a torrent. It is such people, those who speak and act as true human beings, who constitute a strong and stable human society.

Individuals of this nature are as indispensable to human society as commodities like petrol and steel are essential to human civilization. If the things that contribute to civilization did not do what is expected of them, then civilization as we know it could not survive; so if people do not show consistency, reliability and predictability in their character, human society will crumble.

15 October 1985

Religion is useless if one seeks the world thereby

Abu Huraira reports the Prophet as saying: "Those who seek, for worldly interests, learning which should be sought for the sake of God alone, will not experience the fragrance of paradise in the hereafter."

Unadulterated Truth

It is one thing to respect popular feeling, and quite another to have respect for the will of God. Movements which have respect for popular feeling very quickly achieve acclaim and prestige in their environment. The path before them is made relatively easy. Movements which are born of a respect for the Will of God, on the other hand, have to face stern hardships in their environment. The masses flock to the first type of movement, because they find it to be in accordance with their sentiments. The second type of movement, on the other hand, is contrary to the intellectual framework that they are used to; it contradicts things that people take for granted. That is why they can never accept such a movement. They demand that the word of God should be made to fit in with their temperament. When the preacher of the word of God does not fulfill their demand, they turn against them.

This is what happened to the Holy Prophet in Mecca. The Prophet called mankind to belief in one God, and one God alone; but the Quraish could not accept pure monotheism, because it would have adversely affected the saints that they revered; it would have forced them to change the way of life that they were used to; it would have meant overlooking their personal interests. So they asked the Prophet to make a compromise, and put his teachings in a way that they would not clash with Quraish opinion (Quran, 11:112, 10:15).

Under such conditions it was extremely difficult for the Prophet to call people to unadulterated truth. The Prophet was only human, and it was possible that he could have been inclined to compromise with his people, and consider their feelings; but God commanded him to have no regard for the truth alone, presenting God's religion exactly as it was. This is the background to the statement of the Prophet when he was asked by Abu Bakr what had aged him. "Surah Hud and the like of it have aged me," he replied. For it was in these surahs that the verses commanding him to adhere strictly to the word of God, and not bow to popular feeling, were revealed.

16 October 1985

Not hounding a person out of anger

Umar once said: "Do not be obsessive in love or destructive in hate." "How's that?" Aslam asked. "It is to act like child when in love, and to seek to destroy one you hate," Umar replied.

The Message of the Qur'an

Chapter II (contd.) 1020

"Believers, do not say Ra'ina, but say Undhurna. Take heed: the unbelievers shall be sternly punished. The unbelievers among the People of the Book, and the polytheists, resent that any blessings should have been sent down to you from your Lord. But God chooses whom He will for His mercy. And God's grace is infinite. If We abrogate any verse or cause it to be forgotten, We will replace it by a better one or one similar. Do you not know that it is to God that the control over the heavens and the earth belongs, and that there is none besides Him to protect or help you? Would you rather demand of your Apostle that which was once demanded of Moses? He that barter faith for unbelief has surely strayed from the right path" (2:104-108).

One who has been given knowledge of the truth from God has to face stiff opposition when he starts to impart his knowledge to others. Acceptance of truth entails negation of the self. People of position always find this hard, and none more so than the Jews, who considered prophethood to be their exclusive right. Unable to conceive of a prophet coming amongst another people, they tried various ploys to turn people away from the Arab Prophet. One of the theological objections that they raised to his teachings was on the subject of abrogation. Some of the Quranic injunctions differ from Mosaic law, they would say. Does God make mistakes in His revelations, that He sends down one commandment, and then replaces it with another? This shows that what the Prophet Mohammad teaches is not from God, but of his own creation. So intensive had this propaganda campaign become that even some simple-minded Muslims were affected, and started raising the question with the Prophet. Another thing that the Jews would do was sit in the Prophet's company and, by playing on words, make fun of him. For instance, instead of using the unambiguous Arabic word for "May we have your attention" – "Undhurna" – they would say "Raina". "Raina", when pronounced properly, has much the same meaning as "Undhurna", but with protraction of the second vowel it becomes "Raeena", meaning "our shepherd", and with protraction of the first it becomes "Raina", which means idiot.

So the Muslims were told to avoid ambiguous words, and be quite clear in their speech; words with a derisive shade of meaning should be especially eschewed. Furthermore, they should pay close attention to what the Prophet said and try to understand it on their own, without resorting to excessive questioning; receptiveness rather than obstinacy should be the hallmark of their attitude to his instructions. This is how one gains in faith, and it is the consolidation and strengthening of one's faith that should be sought. The Prophet is the recipient of divine revelation. If one is earnest in seeking to learn him, one can share in his blessing. If, however, one is just jealous – why has it been granted to him rather than us? – the good it has to offer will remain forever beyond our reach.

“Many of the People of the Book wish, through selfish envy, to lead you back to unbelief, now that you have embraced the faith and the truth has been made known to them. Forgive them and bear with them until God makes known His will. He has power over all things. Attend to your prayers and pay the poor-due. Whatever good you do shall be rewarded by God. He is watching over all your actions. They declare: ‘None but Jews (or Christians) shall be admitted to paradise.’ Such are their wishful fancies. Say: ‘Let us have your proof, if what you say be true.’ Indeed, those that surrender themselves to God and are sincere shall be rewarded by their Lord: they shall have nothing to fear or to regret” (2:109-112).

Once the Jews had set their minds against the message of Islam as being worthless, they became alarmed by the heartfelt acclaim with which many were receiving it. They considered themselves the only ones qualified to pass decrees on truth and falsehood: how could others be allowed to believe in what they themselves had chosen to disbelieve? The first step that they took was to incite the polytheists to rise up against the Muslims. Secondly, they tried to mislead Muslim converts about their new religion, putting doubts into their minds in the hope that they would revert to the religion of their forefathers. It was only natural that this should provoke the Muslims, but God told them that this was not the time for violent reaction. It would be better to bear with them for a while, until decisive steps could be taken against them. If trust were placed in God alone, He would make this possible. Muslims should always be patient, since patience prevents one from taking negative retaliatory measures in the heat of the moment. They should be steadfast in prayers for prayer brings one closer to God. They should never fail in the payment of Zakat (the poor due), for a society in which the rich are willing to share with the poor will be based on compassion; there will be a real sense of togetherness among its members.

The Jews used to tell new Muslim converts that if you had to forsake your ancestral religion then become a Jew or a Christian. Being the descendants of saints and prophets throughout history, they were the ones who would go to heaven. But the Quran tells us that one does not deserve to enter heaven only by dint of belonging to a certain community. Everyone will be judged according to his own actions. National status is of no significance in the sight of God. To be sincere in one's faith is to become so devoted to God that everything else assumes secondary importance. One will then be free of the prejudice, personal ties and material interests that are stumbling blocks on the road to truth; one will be free to respond positively to the call of truth when one hears it.

Living for God

There are two ways of living in this world. One is a self-oriented life, the other a God-oriented one. An individual then, will either worship himself, or he will worship God. His attention will be focused either upon his own being, or upon God. His aim in life will either be to please himself, or to please God. There is no third way of living in this world. The choice we have is of living either for ourselves, or for God.

In a self-oriented life, everything is centred upon one's own being. You could call it a selfish life, one in which self-interest, personal ambition, greed and lust are the dominating motive forces. One who lives such a life puts all he has into furthering his own interests. He is human only in appearance, for in his manner of living he is no different from other animals. As animals live for themselves, so does he.

In a God-oriented life everything centres upon God. One who lives such a life discovers God in all his greatness. He lives in awe of God, so much so that everything else seems tiny in comparison. His thoughts centre on God, his hopes are in God, it is God that he fears. To him God is everything, and he himself is nothing at all.

This second type of individual is one who lives for God. He is realistic in nature, for the path that he follows conforms to the universal way of nature. There is only one true destiny for man in this world, and that destiny is God. Nothing less can satisfy the needs of man.

Muhammad: The Prophet of Islam

In the year 6AH, the Prophet Mohammad, may peace be upon him, had a dream in Medina. He saw that he, along with his companions, was visiting the House of God in Mecca. His companions were very pleased to hear this, for it meant that, after a lapse of six years, they would soon be going to Mecca and visiting the Holy Ka'aba. In accordance with this dream, the Prophet set out for the holy city with 1400 of his companions. When they reached Ghadeer Ashtat, they heard that the news of their journey had reached the Quraish. Indignant at the idea of the Muslims visiting the House of God, they had amassed an army, and vowed to prevent Mohammad and his companions from entering Mecca, although it was absolutely contrary to Arab tradition to prevent anyone from visiting the Ka'aba. The Prophet was acting under divine inspiration: nevertheless he remained calm when he heard of the Quraish's reaction. He was informed by his spies that Khalid Ibn Walid, intent on blocking the Muslims' path, had advanced with two hundred cavalrymen to Ghameem. On hearing this, the Prophet changed route, deviating from a well-frequented path to a little-known and arduous route, which led him to Hudaibiyya. In this way he avoided clashing with Khalid's army. This is how the historian Ibn Hisham describes the events:

"Who can show us a path not occupied by the Quraish?" the Prophet asked. Someone volunteered to do so. He then proceeded to guide the Muslims by a route which led through arduous, rocky and mountainous passes. The Muslims had great difficulty in crossing these passes, but when they had done so, and emerged upon an open plain, the Prophet called on them to seek forgiveness of God, and turn to Him. This they did and the Prophet said that this was the word of forgiveness which the Israelites had been called upon to utter, but they had failed to do so (see Quran, 2:58).

(Seerat Ibn Hisham, Vol. III, p357)

This was indeed a trying time for the Muslims, but they had to face their trial with patience and forbearance. This was the path laid down for them by God. Even the slightest hesitation to follow that path was to be considered a transgression, for which forgiveness had to be sought. That is why the Prophet urged his followers to repent and seek forgiveness for any weakness or irritability they may have shown at that taxing time. Difficulties should be faced with fortitude. No impulse should cause one to deviate from the path of God.

Hudaibiyya is situated nine miles from Mecca. The Prophet made a halt here in order to survey the situation. From Hudaibiyya he sent Kharash Ibn Umaiyya on camelback to inform the Meccans that the Muslims had come to visit the House of God, not to do battle. On reaching Mecca, Kharash's camel was slaughtered, and attempts were made to murder him as well, but somehow he managed to escape and return to Hudaibiyya. The Prophet then sent Uthman to appeal to the Meccans to refrain from hostilities, and tell them that the Muslims would return quietly to Medina after performing the rites of Umra.* The Meccans paid no heed, and took him prisoner. Later Mikraz Ibn Hafs along with fifty men attacked the Muslims' camp at night, raining stones and arrows down on the pilgrims. Mikraz was captured, but no

action was taken against him: he was released unconditionally. Then, as the Muslims were praying in the early morning, eighty men attacked them from Tan'eem. They were also taken captive and then allowed to go free.

* A minor pilgrimage which, unlike Hajj proper, need not be performed at a particular time of the year, and which entails fewer ceremonies.

Lengthy negotiations with the Quraish followed. Finally, a truce was made between the two sides. At first sight this truce amounted to an outright victory for the Quraish and defeat for the Muslims. The Prophet's followers could not understand how, when God had given them tidings of a visit to the House of God, the Prophet could have agreed to return to Medina without performing the visit. They would be allowed to come the following year, but would have to leave the city after a stay of only three days. Humiliating clauses such as this, exacerbating as they were for the Muslims, were all accepted unquestioningly by the Prophet. It seemed to be an acceptance of defeat.

The Quraish deliberately acted in an aggressive manner in order to offend the Prophet. They wanted to provoke him into initiating hostilities, so that they could find an excuse for fighting him. To prevent a visit to the Ka'aba was in itself quite contrary to Arab tradition. Moreover, it was the month of Dhu-al-Qadah, which was one of four months considered sacred in Arab lore, which prohibited fighting in these months. The Quraish wanted to fight the Muslims, but they did not want to be accused of having desecrated the holy month; they wanted to be able to lay the blame at the door of the Muslims, who were few in number at that time, and not even equipped for battle.

There they were, stranded 250 miles from home, right on the border of enemy territory. It was a perfect opportunity for the Quraish to unleash a savage onslaught on the Muslims, and give full vent to their antagonism. They did everything they could to provoke the Muslims into starting a fight, but the Prophet ignored every provocation; he scrupulously avoided falling into their trap.

The situation was so grave that Abu Bakr was the only one of the companions not to feel that, in accepting humiliating peace terms, they had bowed before the aggressor. They were even more astonished when a verse of the Quran was revealed which referred to the agreement as an "obvious victory". "What kind of victory is this?" one of them protested. "We have been prevented from visiting the House of God. Our camels for sacrifice have not been allowed to proceed. God's Prophet has been forced to turn back from Hudaibiyya. Two of our persecuted brethren, Abu Jandal and Abu Baseer, have been handed over to their persecutors....." Yet it was this humiliating treaty that paved the way for a great Muslim victory.

The Treaty of Hudaibiyya appeared to be a capitulation before the enemy; but in fact it gave the Muslims an opportunity to strengthen themselves, and consolidate their position. The Prophet accepted all the Quraish's demands, in return for a single assurance from them, namely that they would cease all hostilities against the Muslims for ten years. Continual raids and threats of warfare had prevented the Muslims from pursuing constructive missionary work. As soon as the Prophet returned from Hudaibiyya, he intensified missionary work in and around Arabia, the groundwork having been done beforehand. Now that peace prevailed, the message of Islam started spreading like wildfire. People in their

thousands, tribe after tribe, thronged to join the fold of Islam. Islam began spreading beyond the borders of Arabia too. Safe from the idolaters of Mecca, the Prophet was able to take action against, and drive out, the Jews of Khaibar, who had missed no opportunity of helping the enemies of Islam. He also turned his attention to building up the strength of Islam in Medina. The culmination came within only two years of the Treaty of Hudaibiyya: the Quraish surrendered without even putting up a fight. There was no further barrier now to the Prophet's triumphant entry into Mecca. It was the deliberate imposition of a humiliating retreat from Mecca which had paved the way for a great victory.

People nowadays tend to resort to arms on the slightest provocation from their enemies. When the losses of meaningless war are pointed out to them, they justify themselves by saying that they were not the aggressors; the enemy had wickedly involved them in warfare. What they do not realize is that non-violence does not mean remaining peaceful so long as no one is acting violently towards you; it is to refrain from violence even in face of violence – to refuse to be provoked even in face of provocation. Insidious plots should be met and defeated by quiet deliberations. Deeply-rooted though the antagonism of one's foes may be, one should not let their antagonism become either a stimulus or a vindication of one's actions.

To fight one's enemies is no way to succeed in life. Only by avoiding conflict can one consolidate one's strength. Then by awe alone will one be able to overpower one's foes. To fight at the slightest provocation, and ignore the need to quietly build up one's own strength, is to condemn oneself to destruction. Such conduct can never lead to success in this world of God. The Prophet achieved success by pursuing a policy of non-confrontation; how, then, can his followers succeed by pursuing a policy of confrontation? How can they be called his followers when they are blind to his example? How can they expect him to intercede for them on the Day of Judgment?

No favouritism

Abdullah Ibn Arqam came before Umar and said to him: "Commander of the faithful, there are some ornaments and silver dishes in the treasury that have come from Jalula. Have a look at them, and tell us what to do with them. Umar told Abdullah Ibn Arqam to remind him about them when he was not busy. Ibn Arqam came back one day. "You don't seem to be busy today," he said to Umar. "No, I'm not," Umar replied. He then went to the treasury and extracted all the ornaments and dishes. When they were brought before him, he recited this verse of Surah Al-Imran: 'Men are tempted by the lure of women and offspring, of hoarded treasures of gold and silver, of splendid horses, cattle, and plantations. These are the comforts of this life, but far better is the return of God.' "These things have been made tempting for us," he said, "so we cannot help being happy when we look at them. Lord, enable me to dispose of them correctly. I seek Your refuge from their evil." At this time, a child of Umar's, Abdullah came to his father and asked for one ring. Umar told him to go to his mother, who would give him barley-mush to drink instead. He gave the child nothing whatsoever.

The Prophet and His Companions

A good society is one in which one can freely criticize and rebuke others.

It happened once that a certain group of people had a grudge against Abdul Aziz ibn Abu Bakra, On one occasion they even went to the extent of knocking him down, His son ran to his assistance, but his father told him not to make a move, "Really," he said, "if anyone has to die, I would prefer it to be myself." His son asked him why, "I am afraid," Ibn Abu Bakra answered, "that I should be alive at a time when I will not be able to call for righteousness and forbid evil, for then there will be no good in the world,"

Remaining calm in face of criticism

When Umar became caliph, he removed Khalid ibn Walid from his position as commander-in-chief of the army in Syria, Nashira ibn Sahmi Al-Yazni says that he heard Umar give a speech on the day of the Battle of Jabiya, Let me tell you why I have replaced Khalid ibn Walid," he told this congregation, "I had told him to keep the spoils of battle for poor refugees, but he gave them to high-born, educated people, For this reason I have appointed Abu Ubaidah ibn Jarrah in his place," A relative of Khalid ibn Walid, Abu Amr ibn Hafs, was present in the congregation, "That is no excuse," he told the Caliph, "You have removed one whom the Prophet himself appointed, You have put a sword back in its scabbard that he had unsheathed, You have brought down a banner that he had raised, You have shown jealousy towards your own cousin," Umar listened and spoke to him softly, "You are Khalid's close relative, and are still young, That is why you have become angry on his behalf," he said,

Their disagreement was for the sake of truth

Abu Bakr had always made an equal distribution of allowances. It was suggested that he should show more favour towards the Muhajirs and Ansar, but he refused. "They have their rank with God. This is a matter of everyday life, and it is better to be equal in such matters," he said.

Umar did not agree. When he became Caliph, he paid regard to rank in his distribution of allowances, Five thousand dirhams he allotted for the Muhajirs and Ansar, and four thousand for other Muslims. Accordingly, Usama Ibn Zaid got four thousand. But Umar gave his own son, Abdullah, just three thousand. "You have given Usama ibn Zaid four thousand dirhams and allotted me only three thousand," Abdullah complained to his father. What rank does he or his father enjoy over me?" "Both his father and he were dearer to the Prophet than you," Umar told him. Towards the end of his life Umar admitted that Abu Bakr's policy on this matter had been better than his.